

VERTIGO

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Apr 06
SUGGESTED FOR
MATURE READERS
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WILLINGHAM
FERN
PALMIOTTI



Dear Father
Gepetto...

HERE
THEY
COME!

You don't know me, but I'm one
of your many sons, even though
I wasn't one of those favored to
have any part of me actually
carved by your hands.



IT LOOKS
LIKE--YES, THEY
HAVE AIRBORNE FORCES,
CAPTAIN ARTURO. AT LEAST
THREE FLYING CARPET
TEAMS.

WHERE'S
OUR **OWN** DAMNED
AIR COVER?

CAPTAIN
WOLFRUM! FIND OUT
WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR
AIR SUPPORT AND ALSO GET
OUR **WARLOCK** OUT HERE!
HE'S MOST LIKELY TRYING
TO HEX OPEN THE LIQUOR
STRONGBOX!

YES,
SIR!

The Ballad of Rodney and June

—PART 1 OF 2—


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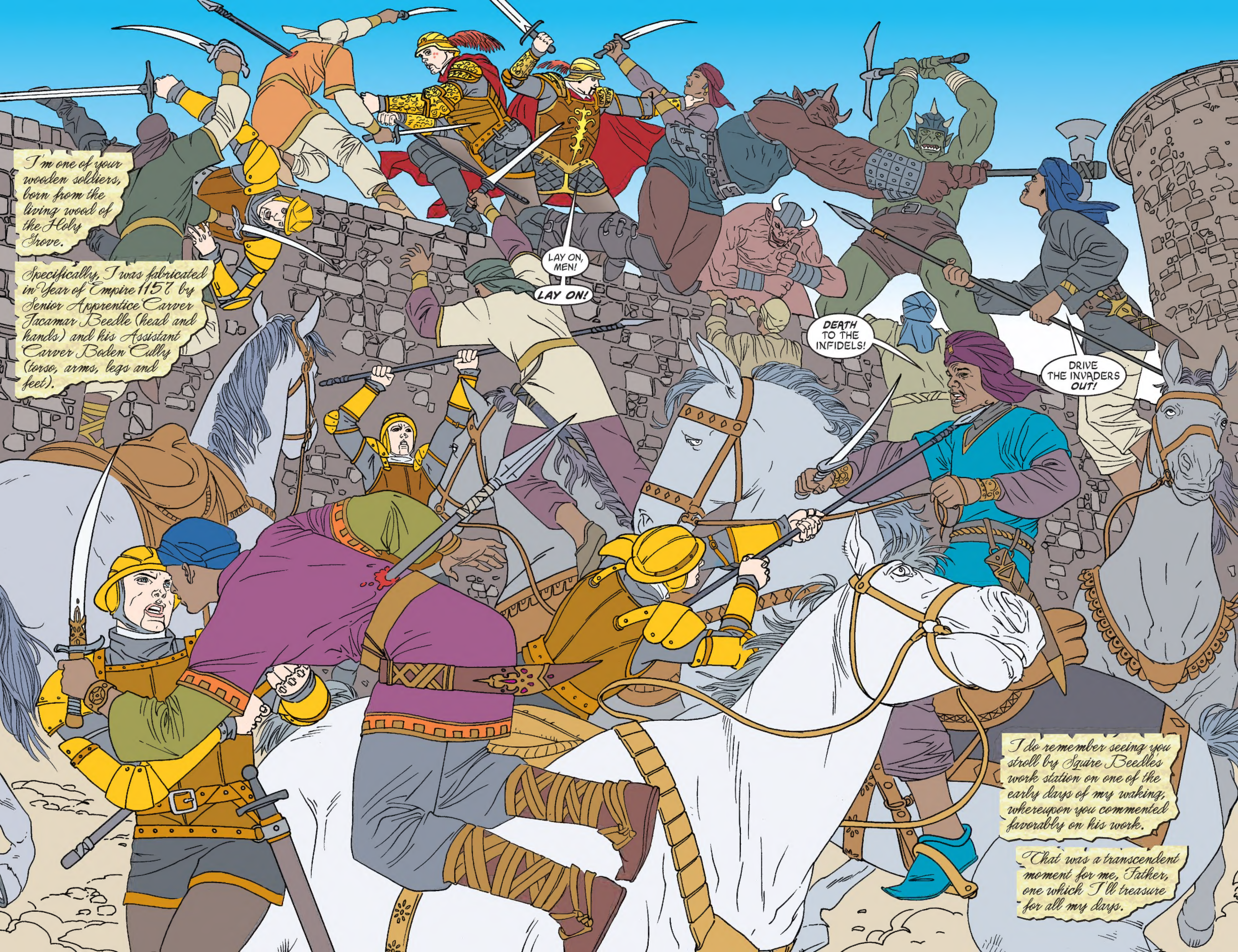
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I'm one of your wooden soldiers, born from the living wood of the Holy Grove.

Specifically, I was fabricated in Year of Empire 1157 by Senior Apprentice Carver Jacamar Beetle (head and hands) and his Assistant Carver Baden Cully (torse, arms, legs and feet).

LAY ON, MEN!
LAY ON!

DEATH TO THE INFIDELS!

DRIVE THE INVADERS OUT!

I do remember seeing you stroll by Squire Beetle's work station on one of the early days of my waking, whereupon you commented favorably on his work.

That was a transcendent moment for me, Father, one which I'll treasure for all my days.



As you're no doubt surmised by now, I'm one of the entirely wooden.

Not even my head and hands were ever intended to pass as flesh.



Like so many others of my kind, I entered military service and have the honor to serve you as a lieutenant of infantry, currently in the illustrious Seventh Horde.

More specifically, I'm second in command of Fell Company, Fifth Cohort.





I was privileged to be among the first to cross worlds in the Arabian campaign.



For the past two weeks we've been pulling garrison duty, occupying a captured Arabian Tables stronghold.

SERGEANT KURP, WHERE IN THE VARIOUS AND SUNDRY HELLS IS OUR AIR COVER?

I'VE BEEN TRYING TO REACH THE 32ND DRAGON AIR FIGHTER WING ALL MORNING, SIR, WITH NO LUCK. THERE'S INTERFERENCE JAMMING THE SIGNAL.



I will not soil these pages by attempting to scrawl its original Arabian name.

We've since rechristened it Fort Walder, to honor another of your sons in our company who died in the taking of it.



HOW DARE YOU MANHANDLE ME LIKE SOME--!

WE NEED YOU TO CLEAR OUR AIRSPACE, DOCTOR.

BUT THAT'S WHAT DRAGONS ARE FOR, WOLFRUM!

We maintain Fort Waller as a supply depot in support of advance raiding parties, deep into Arabian territories.

FINE, THEN CONJURE SOME DRAGONS!

OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT MIGHT WORK!

BUT GET THOSE MISERABLE CARPET RIDERS OUT OF MY SKY!

Naturally the Arabians don't like that.



They try to take it back from us with alarming regularity.



So far without success - thank the gods - and an empire regulation long pike with some guts behind it.

GOOD WORK, BOYS! CAPITAL JOB!

THE BEAST IS DONE FOR NOW.

Seven times since our occupation they've attacked, and seven times we've sent them packing.



THAT'S IT! RUN AWAY, YOU BLOODY-ASSED COWARDS!

COME BACK AFTER YOU'VE WASHED THE SHIT FROM YOUR PANTALOONS!

The latest attack and its immediate aftermath touched off a series of extraordinary events in my life.



WE BEAT THEM AGAIN, SIR.

BUT AT WHAT COST? LET'S HAVE THE BUTCHER'S BILL, FIRST PRIORITY, CAPTAIN WOLFRUM.

IMMEDIATELY, SIR.

YOU CLEARLY DON'T NEED ME ANYMORE. I'LL BE IN MY QUARTERS, REPLACING MY SPENT SPELLS.

And that, Father, is the reason I've chosen to undertake the unprecedented step of writing to you directly.

COLOR SERGEANT LUM. FORM THE RANKS AND CALL THE ROLL. REPORT DEAD AND WOUNDED.

SIR!

I was wounded in the engagement.

I SEE YOU GOT SCRAPED UP A BIT, LIEUTENANT.

YES, SIR. GOT CAUGHT UP IN AN ALTERCATION WITH ONE OF THEIR KITTY CATS.

MISTOOK MY LEG FOR ONE OF HIS CHEW TOYS.

Not too badly, but enough where I had to go see the post woodcarver.

WELL, GET THAT LOOKED AFTER, RODNEY. CAN'T HAVE AN OFFICER OF THE SACRED WOOD HOBBLING ABOUT IN FRONT OF THE MEAT TROOPS.

That's where I met June for the first time.

WHAT HAPPENED TO GÜNTER?

HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE OUR COMPANY'S WOODCARVER.

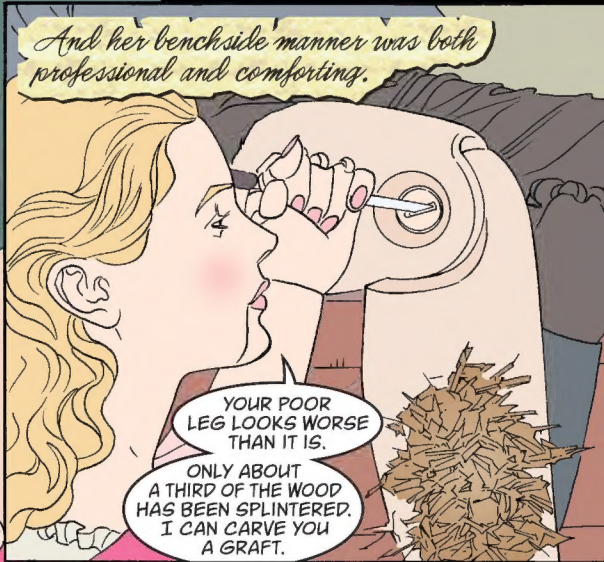
HE'S ON LEAVE. I'LL GO BACK TO THE REPLACEMENT COHORT WHEN HE RETURNS.

She was carved to be the prettiest wooden girl I'd ever seen.



BUT DON'T YOU WORRY YOURSELF, YOUNG LIEUTENANT. I'M FULLY **QUALIFIED** TO CHIP AND SAND YOU BACK INTO SHAPE.

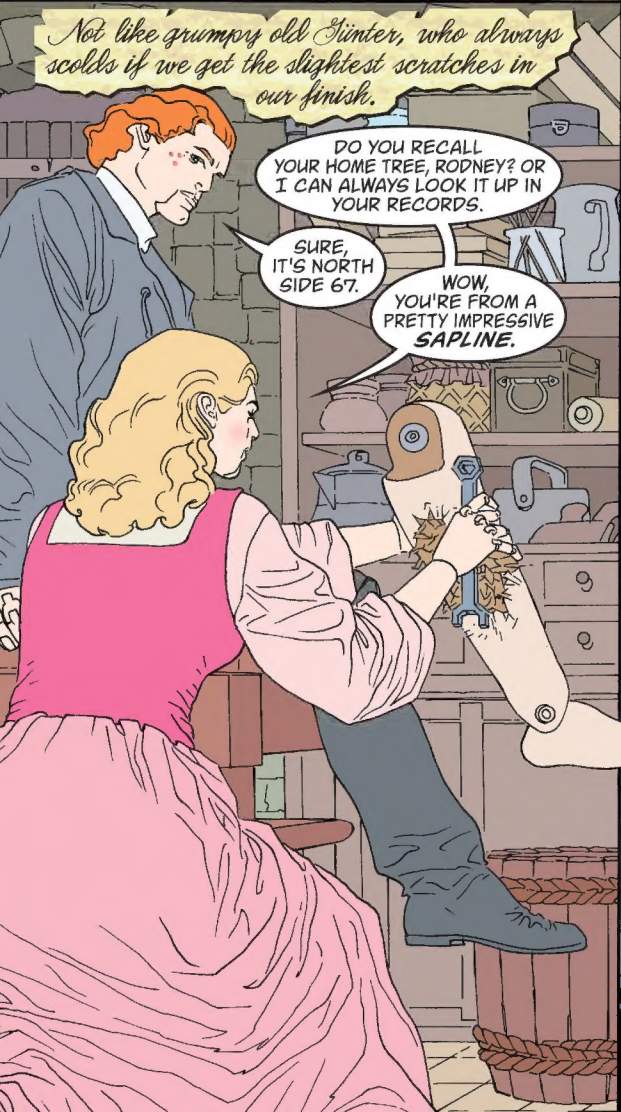
WE'LL GET YOU FIXED UP AS GOOD AS NEW IN TWO SHAKES OF A SNAIL'S WHISKER.



And her benchside manner was both professional and comforting.

YOUR POOR LEG LOOKS WORSE THAN IT IS.

ONLY ABOUT A THIRD OF THE WOOD HAS BEEN SPLINTERED. I CAN CARVE YOU A GRAFT.



Not like grumpy old Stinter, who always scolds if we get the slightest scratches in our finish.

DO YOU RECALL YOUR HOME TREE, RODNEY? OR I CAN ALWAYS LOOK IT UP IN YOUR RECORDS.

SURE, IT'S NORTH SIDE 67.

WOW, YOU'RE FROM A PRETTY IMPRESSIVE **SAPLINE**.

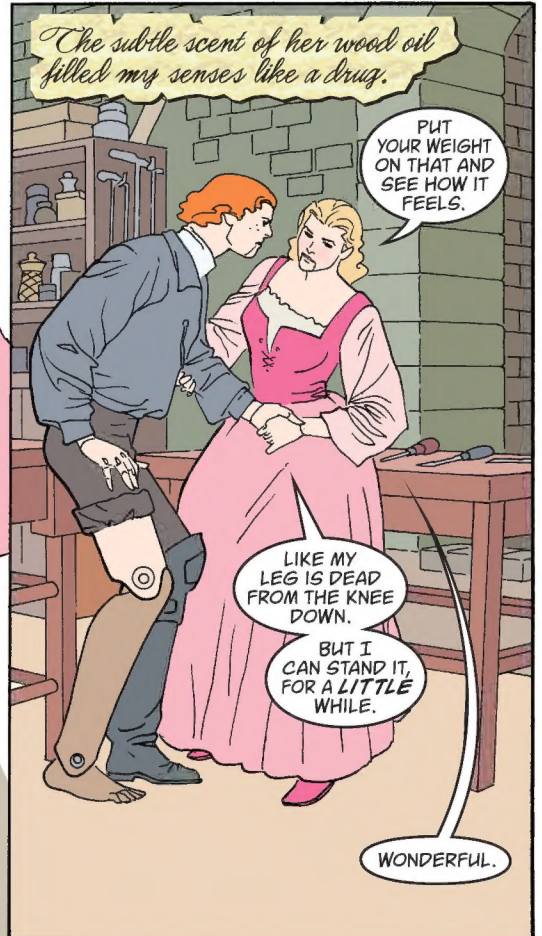
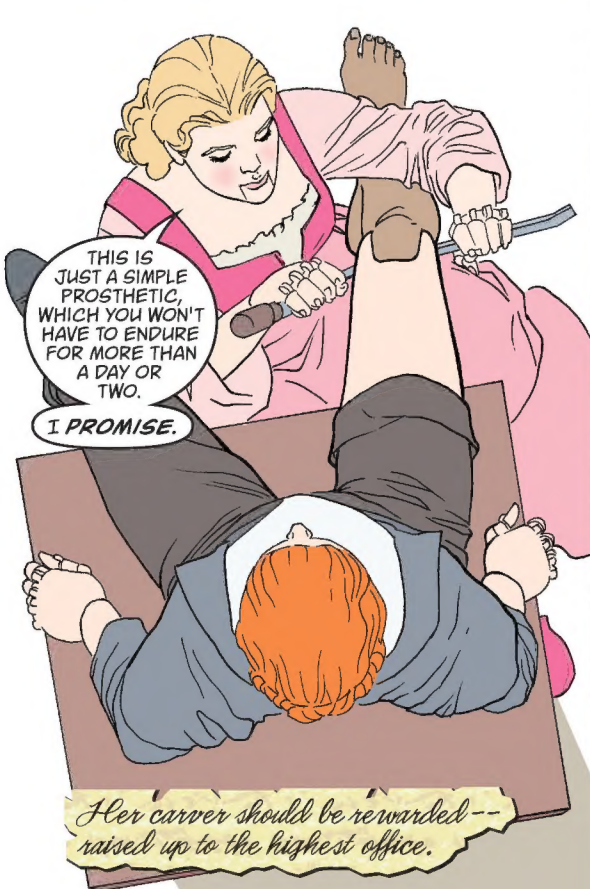
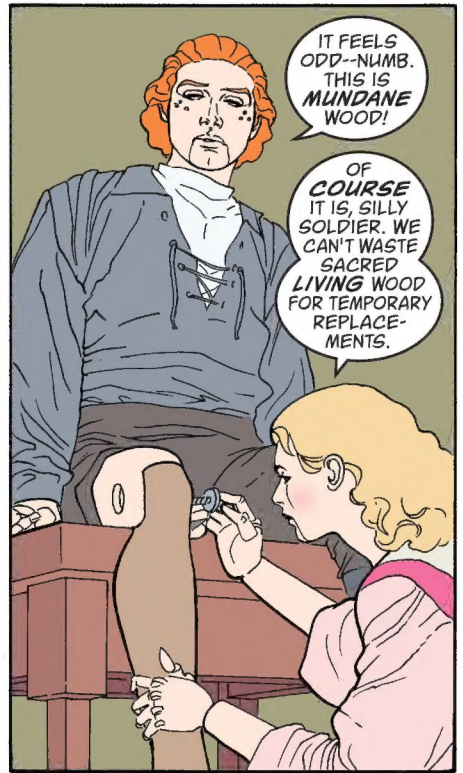
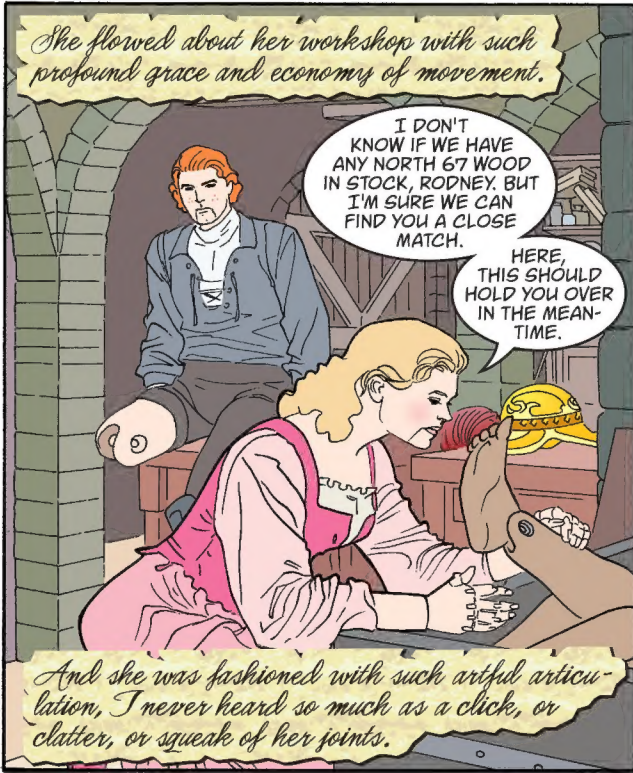


Almost instantly I realized I liked being in her company.

NO WONDER YOU WERE SO BRAVE IN BATTLE.

OH, I DIDN'T DO SO MUCH.

IT'S EASY TO BE BOLD WHEN YOU'RE IMMUNE TO MOST HARM. IT'S OUR MEAT TROOPS WHO ARE THE BRAVE ONES. THEY'RE SO DAMNED EASY TO HURT.



And here's the odd thing. I actually resented the other wooden soldiers in line, waiting to see June - jealous of the time they were about to spend with her.



HEY, LIEUTENANT, WILL WE SEE YOU IN THE GAME TONIGHT?

HOPE SO, CHESTER. WE'LL SEE.

I couldn't stop thinking about her for the rest of the day.

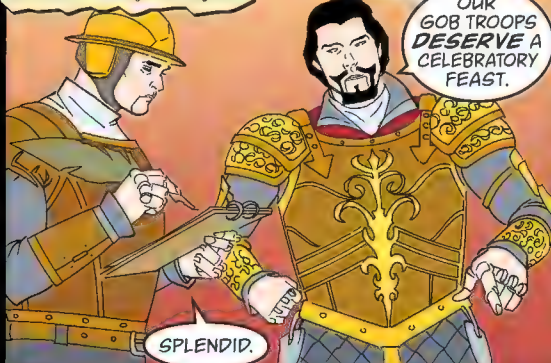


BURN THE BODIES OF OUR GOBLIN TROOPS...

IN ACCORDANCE WITH WHATEVER HEATHEN RITUALS THEY SUBSCRIBE TO.

YES, SIR.

And, needless to say, I didn't understand these new feelings.



BUTCHER AND COOK THE ARABIAN BODIES AND THEIR BEASTS.

OUR GOB TROOPS **DESERVE** A CELEBRATORY FEAST.

SPLENDID.

I've always enjoyed the easy, friendly comradeship of my fellow wooden soldier brothers.



BUT MAKE SURE **NONE** OF THAT GETS INTO THE OFFICERS' MESS.

FOR SOME REASON KNOWN ONLY TO **THEM**, HUMAN MEAT FABLES ARE SQUEAMISH ABOUT EATING THE FLESH OF OTHER HUMAN MEAT FABLES--EVEN IF IT'S THEIR ENEMY.

GOT IT.

We drill and train together and fight side by side against enemies of the empire.



I'LL **NEVER** UNDERSTAND THEM, REMMY--NOT EVEN OUR OWN BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO WERE TURNED INTO MEAT.

NO, SIR. ME NEITHER.

And when off duty we'd retire to the privacy of the Wooden Soldiers Barracks where we'd gamble with dice, or test ourselves against each other with other games of skill and chance.



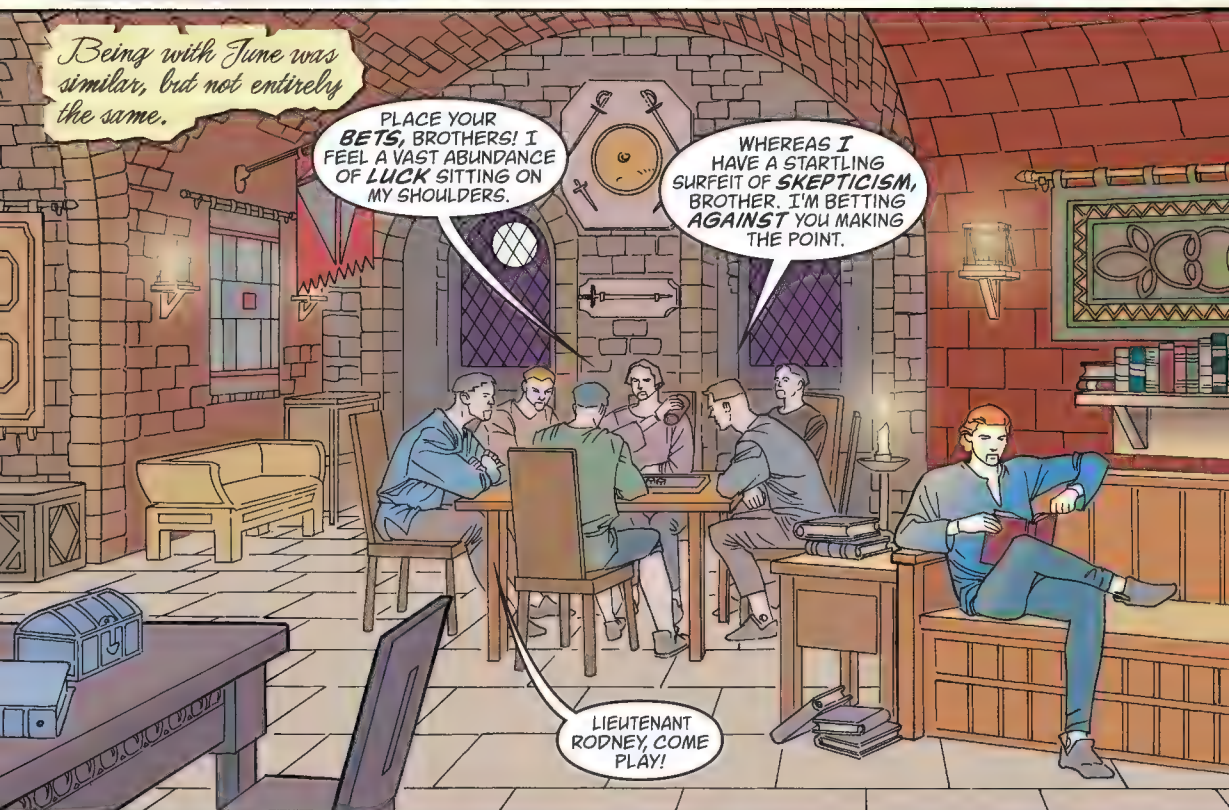
THIRTEEN IS THE POINT TO MATCH!

Being with June was similar, but not entirely the same.

PLACE YOUR BETS, BROTHERS! I FEEL A VAST ABUNDANCE OF LUCK SITTING ON MY SHOULDERS.

WHEREAS I HAVE A STARTLING SURFEIT OF SKEPTICISM, BROTHER. I'M BETTING AGAINST YOU MAKING THE POINT.

LIEUTENANT RODNEY, COME PLAY!



In some immeasurable way it was better, but also profoundly disturbing.

NO THANKS. I'M BUSY.

MAYBE IF I READ AS MUCH AS YOU I'D BE PROMOTED AS AN OFFICER TOO.

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

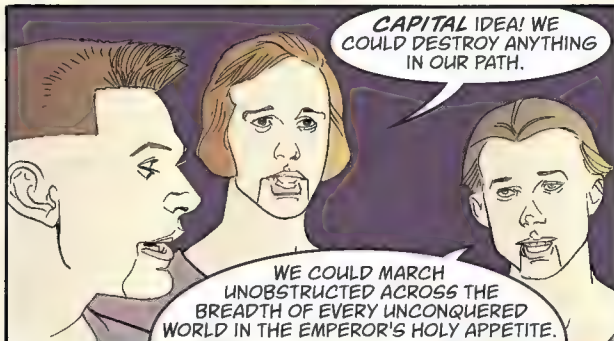






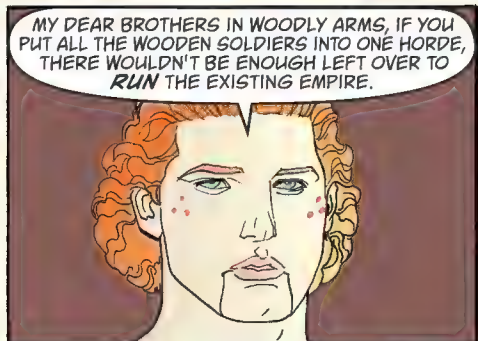
SO WHERE AMONG ALL THOSE DISTRACTIONS AND INADEQUACIES DO THEY HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO **BECOME** DECENT SOLDIERS?

INSTEAD OF SPREADING US OUT AMONG SO MANY **MEAT** COHORTS, WE SHOULD FORM ONE SINGLE **HORDE** OF ALL WOODEN SOLDIERS.

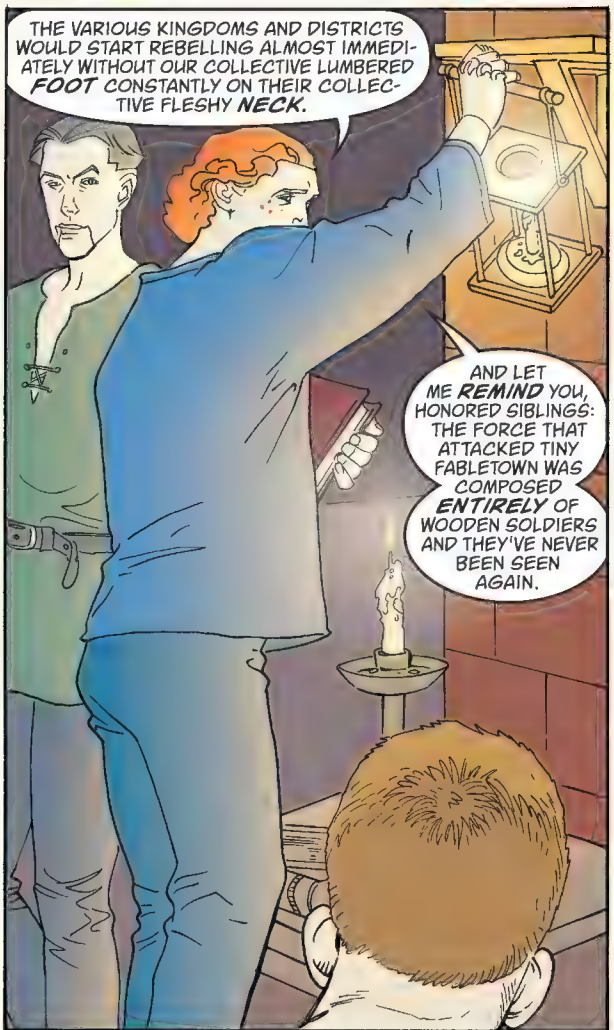


CAPITAL IDEA! WE COULD DESTROY ANYTHING IN OUR PATH.

WE COULD MARCH UNOBSTRUCTED ACROSS THE BREADTH OF EVERY UNCONQUERED WORLD IN THE EMPEROR'S HOLY APPETITE.



MY DEAR BROTHERS IN WOODLY ARMS, IF YOU PUT ALL THE WOODEN SOLDIERS INTO ONE HORDE, THERE WOULDN'T BE ENOUGH LEFT OVER TO **RUN** THE EXISTING EMPIRE.



THE VARIOUS KINGDOMS AND DISTRICTS WOULD START REBELLING ALMOST IMMEDIATELY WITHOUT OUR COLLECTIVE LUMBERED **FOOT** CONSTANTLY ON THEIR COLLECTIVE **FLESHY NECK**.

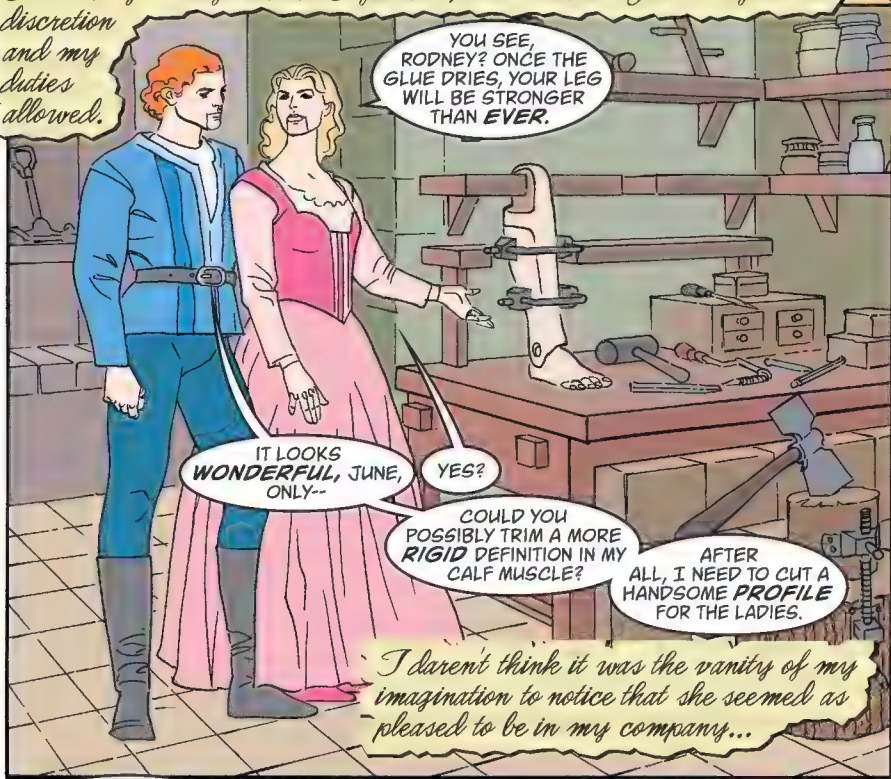
AND LET ME **REMIN**D YOU, HONORED SIBLINGS: THE FORCE THAT ATTACKED TINY FABLETOWN WAS COMPOSED **ENTIRELY** OF WOODEN SOLDIERS AND THEY'VE NEVER BEEN SEEN AGAIN.



IT'S SUCH A PLEASANT EVENING, I THINK I'LL ADJOURN MY READING TO THE RAMPARTS.

ENJOY YOUR GAME, BROTHERS.

In the days that followed I found excuses to visit June as often as discretion and my duties allowed.



YOU SEE, RODNEY? ONCE THE GLUE DRIES, YOUR LEG WILL BE STRONGER THAN EVER.

IT LOOKS WONDERFUL, JUNE, ONLY--

YES?

COULD YOU POSSIBLY TRIM A MORE RIGID DEFINITION IN MY CALF MUSCLE?

AFTER ALL, I NEED TO CUT A HANDSOME PROFILE FOR THE LADIES.

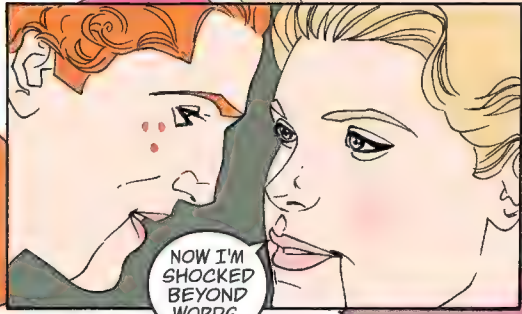
I don't think it was the vanity of my imagination to notice that she seemed as pleased to be in my company...

...as I was in hers.

OH, RODNEY, HOW YOU DO CARRY ON JUST LIKE A LOWLY MEAT.

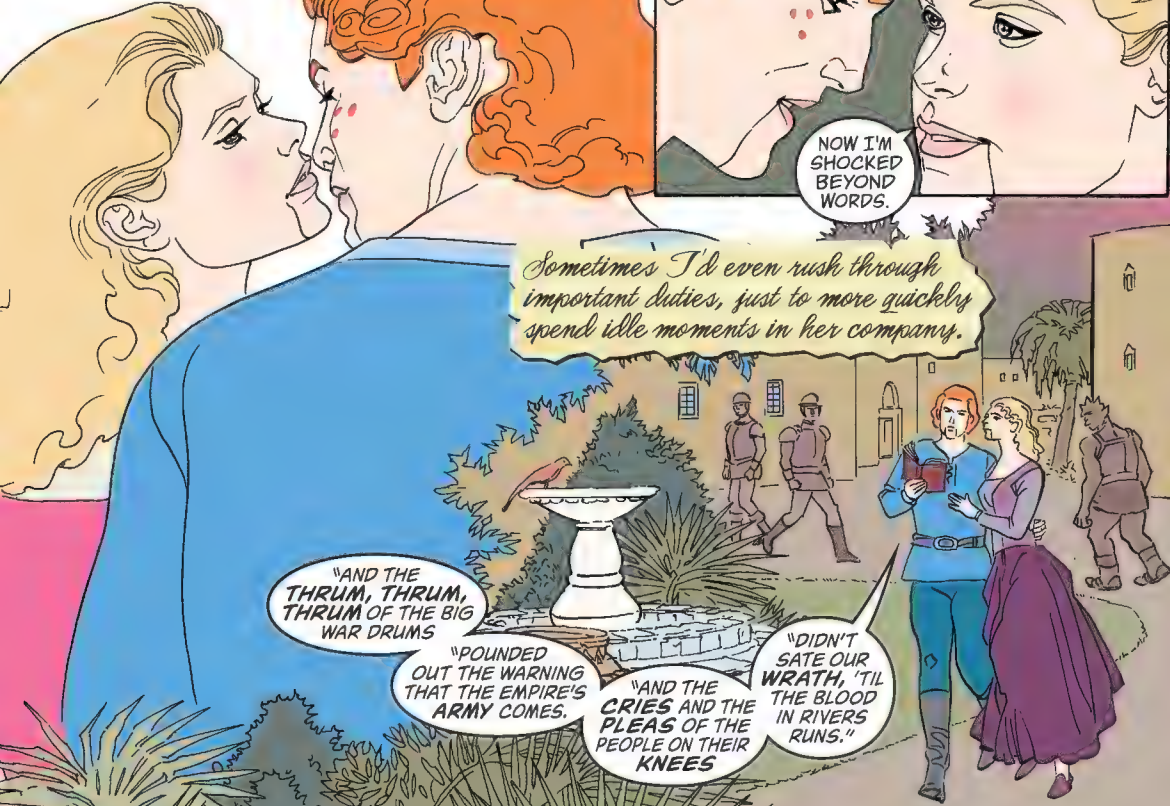
YOU SHOULDN'T APE THEM SO. IT'S UN-SEEMLY FOR CIVILIZED WOODFOLK.

AROUND YOU I'M TEMPTED TO ACT UNSEEMLY, FROM TIME TO TIME.



NOW I'M SHOCKED BEYOND WORDS.

Sometimes I'd even rush through important duties, just to more quickly spend idle moments in her company.



"AND THE THRUM, THRUM, THRUM OF THE BIG WAR DRUMS"

"POUNDED OUT THE WARNING THAT THE EMPIRE'S ARMY COMES."

"AND THE CRIES AND THE PLEAS OF THE PEOPLE ON THEIR KNEES"

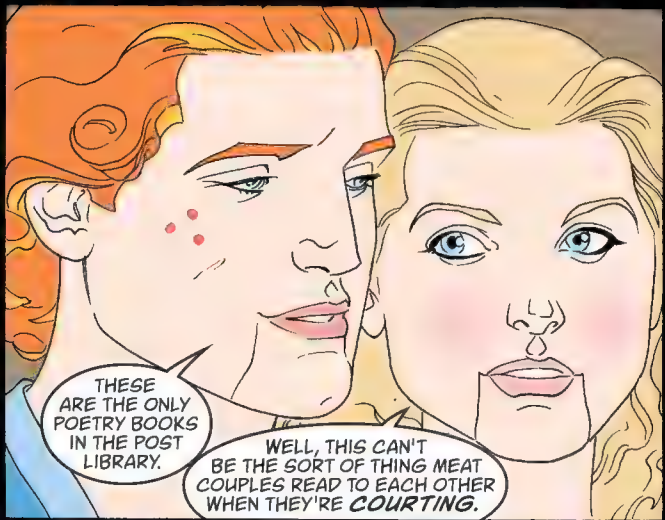
"DIDN'T SATE OUR WRATH, 'TIL THE BLOOD IN RIVERS RUNS."



And now, Father, we come to the confessional passage of this letter.

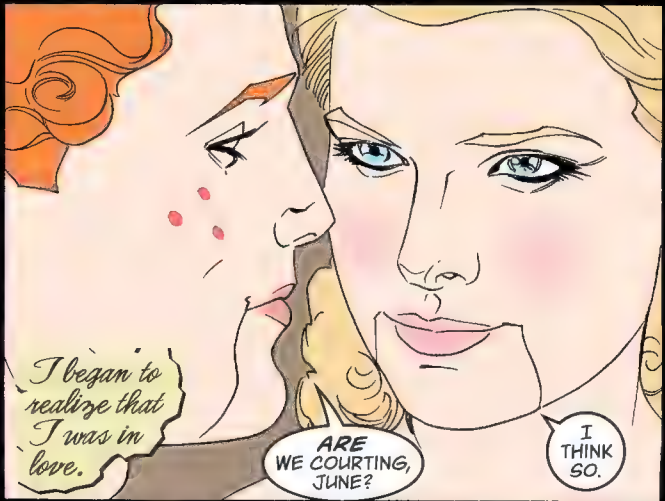
RODNEY, MUCH AS I LIKE YOUR MARTIAL POETRY, DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING MORE...UHM, SOFT?

SOME-THING LESS WARLIKE?



THESE ARE THE ONLY POETRY BOOKS IN THE POST LIBRARY.

WELL, THIS CAN'T BE THE SORT OF THING MEAT COUPLES READ TO EACH OTHER WHEN THEY'RE *COURTING*.



I began to realize that I was in love.

ARE WE COURTING, JUNE?

I THINK SO.



And damned if she didn't also grow to love me.

IT'S SO HARD TO BE CERTAIN, SINCE IT ISN'T THE WOODEN WAY FOR THOSE CARVED AS MEN AND THOSE CARVED AS WOMEN TO--YOU KNOW.

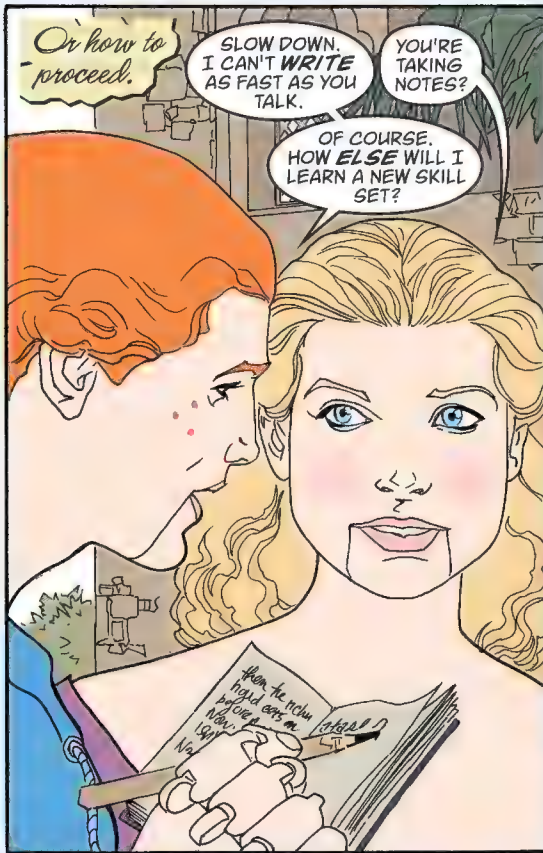
CLEAVE TOGETHER?

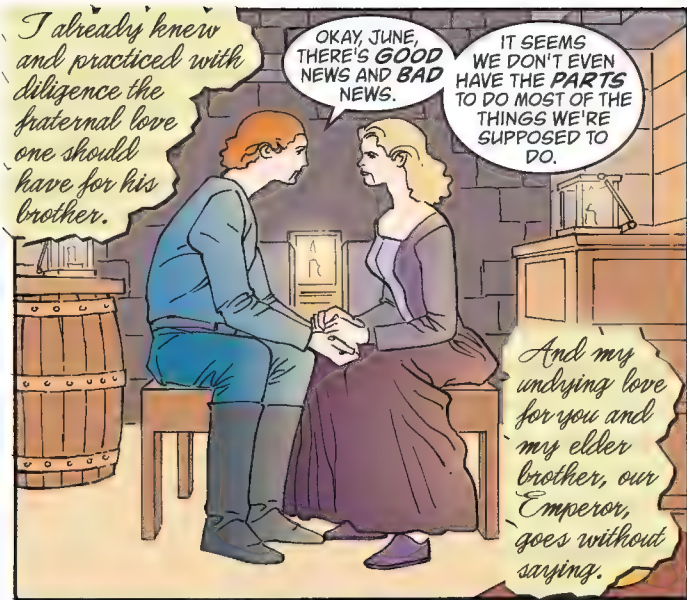
Of course neither of us knew what we were doing.

BUT I BELIEVE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO SPEND **LESS** TIME TALKING ABOUT SWORDS AND WOUNDS INFLICTED ON AN ENEMY AND **MORE** TIME TALKING ABOUT FLOWERS AND SUNSETS.

AND I'VE HEARD YOU MIGHT COMPARE MY EYES TO **STARS**.







I already knew and practiced with diligence the fraternal love one should have for his brother.

OKAY, JUNE, THERE'S **GOOD NEWS** AND **BAD NEWS**.

IT SEEMS WE DON'T EVEN HAVE THE **PARTS** TO DO MOST OF THE THINGS WE'RE SUPPOSED TO DO.

And my undying love for you and my elder brother, our Emperor, goes without saying.



BUT WE CAN KISS--I THINK.

IT SEEMS SIMPLE ENOUGH--PROVIDING I WROTE DOWN THE INSTRUCTIONS RIGHT. I WAS SCRIBBLING SO FAST--

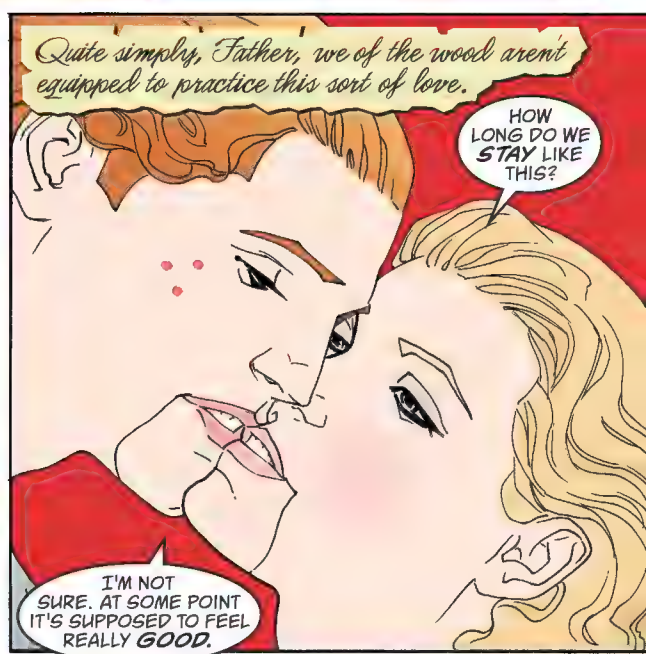
LET'S TRY IT.



But this was a different kind that seemed to call for different expressions of devotion.

BASICALLY WE OPEN OUR MOUTHS AND **TOUCH** THEM TOGETHER.

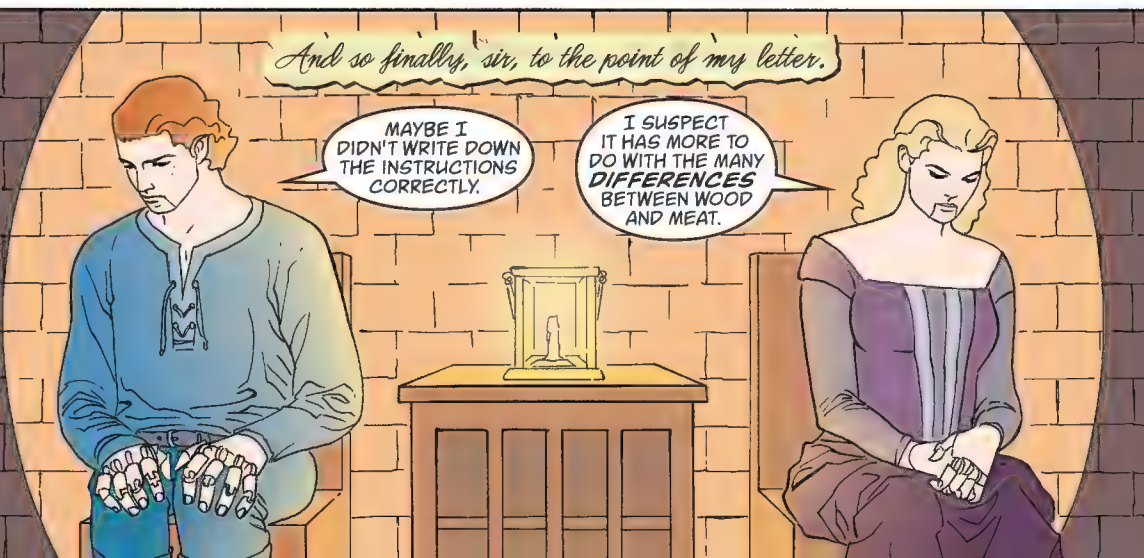
WE CAN DO THAT.



Quite simply, Father, we of the wood aren't equipped to practice this sort of love.

HOW LONG DO WE **STAY** LIKE THIS?

I'M NOT SURE. AT SOME POINT IT'S SUPPOSED TO FEEL **REALLY GOOD**.



And so finally, sir, to the point of my letter.

MAYBE I DIDN'T WRITE DOWN THE INSTRUCTIONS CORRECTLY.

I SUSPECT IT HAS MORE TO DO WITH THE MANY **DIFFERENCES** BETWEEN WOOD AND MEAT.

Father, you have the power to turn wood and sap into flesh and blood. And though neither June nor I were originally chosen for that blessing, I request it now.



For both of us.

I confess I've always been a bit disdainful of my brothers and sisters who were made of meat, but now I realize that many owe more to jealousy than the vanity of woodlily superiority.



June and I want to be transformed into a real man and woman. Then we want your permission to marry and raise dozens of fat, fleshy grandchildren for you.

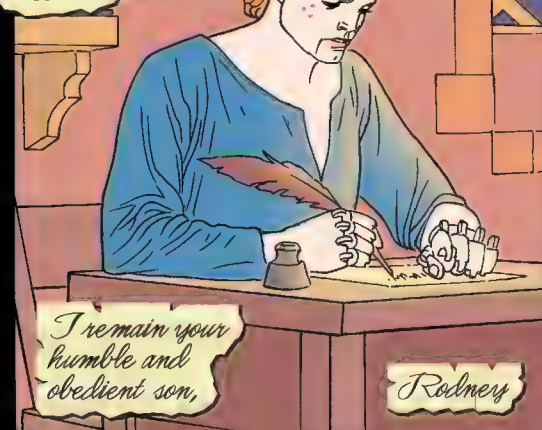


Forgive my audacity in acting so far above my station to make such impertinent and unprecedented requests of you.



It's not for me to know your grand design. My place is to obey what you plan, order and direct.

Still, if our selfish desires don't fall outside of your designs, then I close this letter by repeating my request.



I remain your humble and obedient son,

Rodney





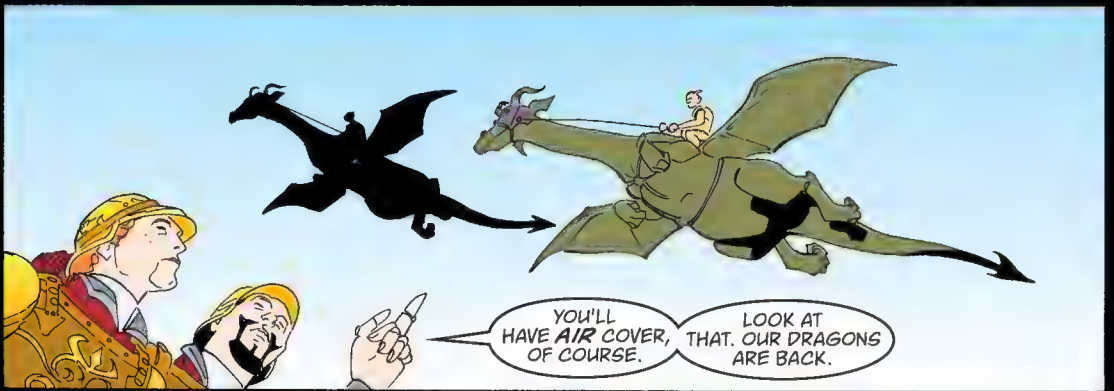
CAPTAIN ARTURO?

THERE YOU ARE, RODNEY. I WAS JUST ABOUT TO SEND FOR YOU. WE HAVE A NEW SUPPLY CARAVAN COMING IN FROM PORT LEONARD.



I WANT YOU TO TAKE AN ARMED PATROL OUT TO MEET IT EN ROUTE AND ESCORT IT BACK HERE.

TAKE MISS JUNE WITH YOU. SHE'S DONE HERE. GUNTER'S LEAVE IS UP AND HE'S COMING WITH THE CARAVAN.



YOU'LL HAVE AIR COVER, OF COURSE.

LOOK AT THAT. OUR DRAGONS ARE BACK.



THOSE DILETTANTE WEASELS IN THE AIR GUARD HAVE FINALLY DEIGNED TO COME BACK OUT FROM BEHIND THEIR MOTHERS' SKIRTS.

PREPARE TO LEAVE FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.



ANY QUESTIONS?

NO, SIR. BUT I DO HAVE A LETTER TO GO OUT WITH THE NEXT MAIL RUN.





I CAN'T LET YOU SEND THIS LETTER!

IT'S TREASONOUS!



NOT AT ALL, SIR. I ONLY WANTED TO--

WHAT IF THIS THING FELL INTO ENEMY HANDS? IT REVEALS INFORMATION ABOUT THE TRUE NATURE OF OUR FATHER'S PLACE IN THE EMPIRE.



FOR THAT MATTER, IF IT WAS EVER READ BY THE WRONG ONE OF OUR OWN PEOPLE IT COULD BE RUINOUS!

YOU CALL OUR FATHER BY NAME AND PRACTICALLY ADMIT THE EMPEROR ISN'T REALLY THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY!



I DIDN'T THINK ABOUT THAT, SIR, I--

YOU CERTAINLY DIDN'T THINK. I THOUGHT YOU WERE A BETTER OFFICER THAN THIS!



GO BACK TO YOUR QUARTERS, LIEUTENANT. STAY THERE UNTIL I SEND FOR YOU.

I NEED TO PONDER WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS.

next: some of the consequences of forbidden love.

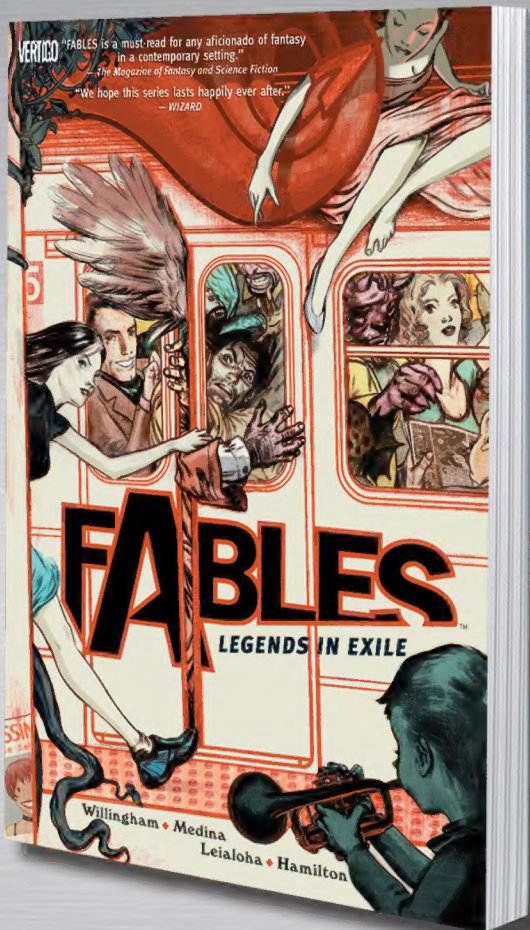
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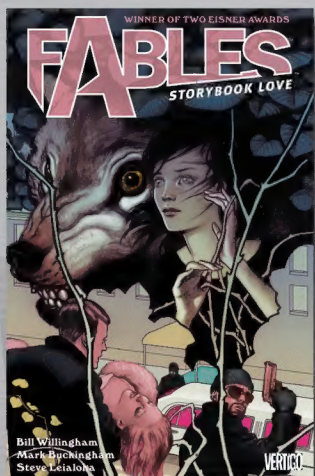
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- VOL. 4: MARCH OF THE WOODEN SOLDIERS
- VOL. 5: THE MEAN SEASONS
- VOL. 6: HOMELANDS
- VOL. 7: ARABIAN NIGHTS (AND DAYS)
- VOL. 8: WOLVES
- VOL. 9: SONS OF EMPIRE
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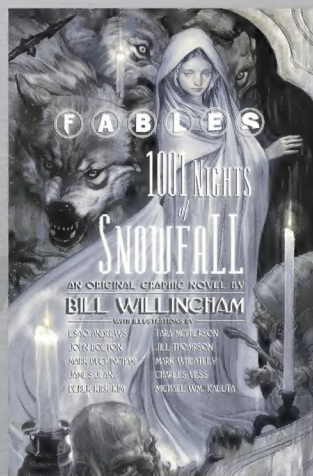
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